

# *Ideas Have Also Roots*

G E R H A R T N I E M E Y E R

ON JULY 17, 1980, the *Wall Street Journal* carried Irving Kristol's article, "The New Republican Party," which called for the articulation of a Republican "ideology." In an age of "organized opinion,"—Kristol's synonym for "ideology"—the Republicans' distaste for anything ideological has become anachronistic, he said. One cannot fight ideologies with nothing. Instead of at least sketching the outlines of a Republican official opinion, however, Kristol went on to describe the four elements which now make up the Republican Party, which description did not advance his purpose. This paper is meant as an attempt to respond to Kristol's call. I shall begin, though, pleading with Mr. Kristol to drop the term "ideology" in this context. Precisely because we do live in an age of ideologies, we need to keep this most useful concept which, as it has been employed in a pejorative sense throughout its history, helps us to distinguish between irrational political thought on the one side, and philosophy as well as common sense on the other. Having stated my one reservation, though, I emphatically agree with Kristol's thesis that you "cannot fight something with nothing." With the exception of Mr. Carter's somewhat wobbly sally onto the glacis of human rights, we have fought the battle of ideas exclusively with gestures which frequently missed the point and were also based on mistaken assumptions. The recent elections have assured conservative intellectuals, meaning all those capable of articulating the conservative persuasion, of a hearing. We will be heard with genuine attention, if for no other reason than curiosity, but maybe for not more than two or three years. Still, our situation reminds one of that of Edmund Burke to whom, in the 1780's, hardly anybody paid attention. Then came the French Revolution which gave him his chance, and his intellectual

response to it turned into words ringing down the centuries.

It is a response to our historical situation which we are called to formulate. That means we must avoid anything resembling Madison Avenue's approach like the devil himself. Nor is it incumbent on us to create a self-image. The plight of our age is too serious for such frivolities. Mr. Kristol is right in pointing out that we are beset, on the right and the left, with deeply irrational ideologies. "It is incumbent on us, at all events, to give a definite answer to the question implicit in the blood and strife of this century. . . . Ideology today is concerned only with the denial of other human beings, who alone bear the responsibility of deceit. It is then that we kill. Each day, at dawn, assassins in judges' robes slip into some cell: murder is the problem today." (Camus, *The Rebel*, Vintage Book 1956, p. 4f) Vis-à-vis this frenzy we must find terms for the mode of reason. Fortunately, the groundwork has been done admirably by great political theorists and philosophers of the last two generations. We are now in a position to distinguish clearly between activist ideology (the Fascists, Communists, National Socialists, Anarchists, and a great variety of terrorists operating today in small groups), and the "soft" intellectual irrationality that indulges itself in a dream-world of such visions as "a world safe for democracy," "war on poverty," "world law," and so on. In all cases, though, we cannot simply come forth with rational alternatives: we must travel the negative way which moves to rationality through an analysis of concrete forms of irrationality. I shall make five points: two about sources of irrationality, three about their results.

1. The activist irrationality of our days is the kind of politics that presumes the character of an absolute, the absolute which in all tradition has belonged to the

divine, the transcendent, the sacred. I am not referring to the kind of politics which takes sword in hand to the end of forcible conversion or the enforcement of conformity. That is bad enough. What troubles us today, however, goes further. It is a politics which sees itself as the absolute, to the exclusion of any religious authority. Marx may serve as an example. He disdained political reforms which he called "political emancipation." Instead, he called for "human emancipation." What he rejected was civil rights; what he embraced was the creation of a new man in a new world. He went on to claim that the self-emancipation of the proletariat from the dominion of capital, by means of violent revolution, would realize that "human emancipation" not merely for the proletariat but for all men. Thus a revolutionary enterprise was lifted from, or above, politics and endowed with the character of an absolute good, which pushed its opponents into the role of absolute evil. Hence the drive for total power which alone could assure victory. Meanwhile, the enterprise itself is claimant, judge, and normative standard, all in one. It moves not toward a concrete objective, which is rather characteristic of normal politics, but toward an ever-expanding and ever-intensifying power, limitless because no particular object will satisfy it and no normative standard is allowed to restrict it. The concept of peace is alien to this kind of politics, as is the idea of the balance of power. Marx proclaimed the principle of "permanent revolution" in 1850, and Lenin gave it a new name, "protracted struggle," in 1920. Both men issued repeated and insistent warnings against the temptation to consider the revolutionary movement accomplished at any particular time. Neither peace nor its attendant, law, nor a notion of live and let live, nor even the axiom of a common human condition ties the leaders of such an enterprise to the rest of the world.

This is what Camus has called "politics (become) religion." His remark referred, strictly speaking, to the activist ideologies of our time. His analysis, however, has a wider scope, which will occupy us present-

ly. For the moment, however, we must stop to make clear that we are not looking at the problem of politics and religion in the institutional sense. Religious establishment is not the trouble of our century. Rather, we are tossed about by irrationality flooding in through an intellectual breach in the divider between the natural and the supernatural. The kind of thinking which gives the character of salvation from all evil to progress, or to the wholesale solving of "problems," or the basic transformation expected from revolution, constitutes an illicit pulling of divinity into the historical immanence, and a fallacious deification of political forces and political mission, from which stem the polarization of humanity into two essentially unequal elements, and the justification of total power ("murder," Camus would say) of one over the other.

In belaboring what must by now be obvious, I am really making an argument relevant to the problem of fusion among the two conservative movements. For conservatives cannot make a recommendation in public that one must keep away from such dangerous merging of relative politics with the absolute of religion, unless we as conservatives recognize a religious absolute that must not be thus abused. It is the liberals' disregard for the religious absolute that explains their failure to see Soviet communism for what it is—a fallacious and perverted religion—and this failure in turn engenders the liberal disposition to expect an imminent turn of the Communist mind to rationality, in spite of consistently recurring evidence to the contrary, and their persistent attempt to reconcile what is irreconcilable. These are illusions that come naturally to an agnostic mind. Not that all religious believers are immune from it. Nor can one say all agnostics necessarily must be deceived about the Soviet mind. The point is that, when conservatives address the nation, the problem of mistaken politics toward the Soviet Union must be explained in its intellectual origins and that cannot be done if man's spiritual dimension is neglected as irrelevant. Conservatives speaking publicly about totalitarianism must take into account the

religious dimension of human experience.

2. Ideology is not confined to communists and fascists. We, too, have our share of it, and it shows in our policies. All modern ideologies have the same irrational root: the permeation of politics with millenarian ideas of pseudo-religious character. The result is a dreamworld. Woodrow Wilson dreamed both of "a world safe for democracy," and of "enduring peace," a "world safe from war." More recently, our national leaders have talked about "creating" a new society, a "Great Society," and to that end making "war against poverty," "war against hunger," "creating new men," "making the world new as at the beginning," building "a city shining on a hill." All these presume that man could create himself, implying that he is not a creature dependent on God, but the master of his own soul and destiny. Civilizational activities are given the character of salvation and thus stamped with a label of sacredness.

In foreign policy, the decision-makers themselves talk to each other in ideological jargon. Eric Voegelin has described their situation: "The identification of dream and reality as a matter of principle has practical results which may appear strange but can hardly be considered surprising. . . . Gnostic societies and their leaders will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop, but such dangers will not be met by appropriate actions in the world of reality. They will rather be met by magic operations in the dreamworld, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc. If a war has a purpose at all, it is the restoration of a balance of forces and not the aggravation of disturbance. . . . Instead the Gnostic politicians have put a Soviet army on the Elbe, surrendered China to the Communists, at the same time demilitarized Germany and Japan, and in addition demilitarized our own army. The facts are trite, and yet it is perhaps not sufficiently realized that never

before in the history of mankind has a world power used a victory deliberately for the purpose of creating a power vacuum to its own disadvantage." (*The New Science of Politics*, 1952, 170, 172)

Voegelin wrote thirty years ago, but today our policies toward the Soviet Union, the Salt treaties, détente, our mistaking condemnation of the invasion of Afghanistan for action, our persistent use of the term "aggressor" as if it were an efficient weapon, the "banning" of certain means of power, for instance, poison gas, the constantly reiterated expectation of "peace in our time," or "enduring peace," all these testify to a besetting lack of a sense of reality in our foreign policies. We introduced "human rights" into our foreign policy not as a weapon of propaganda, which it properly is, but rather as a pretension on our part to play the role of a kind of world supervisor, a global governess, chiefly in dealing out punishment to our own friends. We set up the United Nations with the implicit expectation that it could and would function as a kind of embryonic world government, and we still acknowledge that pretension even in the face of ridiculously unrealistic results. Sobriety in foreign as well as domestic policies cannot be restored unless we, the conservative element in our nation, are united in recognizing that in all these cases the "dreamworld" stems from the illicit mixture of pragmatic politics with misplaced religious expectations, which in turn requires us to acknowledge the right place of religious expectations. One need not be a believer in order to treat man's religious hopes with the seriousness they deserve. The problem of our time is a Western intellect disoriented by inadequate religion.

3. If our domestic policies suffer from a touch of millenarian illusion, they suffer even more from the loss of a concept of man. The evidence is all around us: Modern novels and stories are filled not with living characters but rather with ciphers which represent an aspect of ideological abstraction, or else an abstractly presented "problem." The theater and the screen are served by writers who have dif-

ficuity in finding plots, i.e. stories of the drama of human souls. So they invent either unreal happenings or else make "stories" out of technical problems, reminding one of the theatrical fare of the Soviet Union which invariably turns on the problems of the factory or collective farm, or at most the armed forces. But the loss of a concept of man is manifest in other fields. Philosophers no longer talk about man, but only about the meaning of words. In jurisprudence they do not consider moral responsibility but rather circumstantial influences, or sickness. In education man is seen as completely malleable, an object for conditioning. Welfare work operates on the notion of social objectives which no longer have anything to do with persons. The list could go on.

The concept of man was not lost all at once but over a long period. It is impossible to tell or even sketch the story here. By way of example, let us merely quote a remark by Henri de Lubac, in his analysis of the positivism of Auguste Comte, embodied in Comte's writings of the 1830's and '40's. Comte was determined to "do without God," and envisaged a universe of nothing but phenomena which could be fully known by the methods of the natural sciences. Positive sciences, as he called them, did not admit of any doubt and did not allow any disobedience or even variance of opinion. Comte postulated a social order dominated by "sociology," a science which had made morality a matter of scientific knowledge that was undisputable. "Thus," says Lubac, "if man, in his moral being, is crushed by society, it is because, in his essence, he is first crushed by the universe. The positivist order is an acceptance of Inevitability. There is nothing in man that escapes its blind face." (*The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, Meridian Books 1963, 157)

Reductionism also loses the whole man. Marx sees nothing but the economic aspects of human life, treating everything that pertains to human consciousness as secondary and derived. Man's economic activities and relations alone are counted as real, as far as society and history are concerned. Values are merely subjective and

therefore unreal. Similarly Freud also reduces man to a fragment, the hidden but ultimate reality of the unconscious. Freud does acknowledge the governing function of reason but finds that its result, civilization, is always beset by endemic discontents, because the "real" man is located elsewhere. Hence psychology as a science knows, on the whole, only the neurotic man, the sick man, mistaking him for the whole of human reality. Again this inadequate concept of man is amply manifested in our literature.

The story of this loss of the fullness of man is a long one, but it is intrinsically bound up with the rebellion against Christianity. One can recognize and deplore the problem without being able to name a remedy. I am convinced that one cannot merely wish for a concept of man and obtain it instantly, as from a fairy. There is such a thing as an area of intellectual destruction where no growth is possible. The destruction began with the Enlightenment and was continued by Romanticism, so that now there is a "Wasteland." As our libertarians manifestly are heirs to the Enlightenment it would simply not do to address to them an urgent appeal to restore the concept of man. But there are those who have not left the ground of the Christian tradition and who are still capable to envisage the concept of man which Alexander Schmemmann tersely defines: "Man — created; fallen; redeemed." "Created" — therefore having a recognizable nature; "fallen" — that nature vitiated by sin and thus given to evil; "redeemed" — in a renewed relation with the God of goodness. There were outstanding thinkers in the past who, in spite of not being Christian, essentially accepted this concept of man: Montaigne, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Jacob Burckhardt. These men represent the Enlightenment without having severed the link between themselves and the Christian tradition.

I should like to put these four up as my leading paradigms for the possibility of conservative "fusion," for they were men who, though unable to believe in God, did not worship an inferior substitute. In our

time, one can turn to some great literature in which there are still living human characters, because the authors can still imagine the fullness of man's experiences: William Faulkner, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Wyndham Lewis, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Robert Musil, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Thus some islands are sticking out of the flood of devastation. Could we possibly agree to meet on these places? Russell Kirk, in his article "Criminal Character and Mercy" (*Modern Age*, Fall 1980) resorts to factual reporting with a minimum of symbolism and a maximum appeal to universal experiences. Could that be acceptable as a mode of communication between two elements of our civilization who have lost the community of symbols as regards man? This method would be slow and tedious, but it might offer a way out.

4. We shall now move a little faster, as we turn to the loss of the notion of evil. In the Christian tradition evil was conceived as not having autonomous being of its own (rather, as a deprivation of good), and accounted for by the myth of the fall and the idea of original sin. The great wave of profanization in the 17th and 18th century swept this kind of thinking away. Human reason raised the claim that it is capable of knowing all, that no divine mystery would be left, and no mystery of man either. Hence the 18th century explanation of evil as resulting from institutions that had grown in history instead of being established on the basis of rational knowledge. It followed that evil could be removed through new and rational institutions. The next and logical step was Rousseau's teaching that man is good in himself, as witnessed by the happy and noble savage. All that is needed is a return to nature. The nineteenth century then was full of programs of freedom conceived as releasing or restoring this basic goodness. There could be no more evil "if only the will of the people were to prevail," or "if there were no more private property," or "if the market forces were allowed to work freely," or "if authority were eliminated," or "if the unconscious were adequately recognized," or

"if all restraints and rules were abolished." In our century, finally, there is no more concept of evil, in the minds of many, if not most, educated people. There may be grievances, disease, frustrations, but all these are causes that can be remedied with assurance of success. At any rate, evil is located in the environment rather than in the human heart.

If I said that this is the assumption in the minds of many people, I should have further qualified it by saying, "in most cases." For while evil had indeed disappeared from our thinking about man, it is still attributed to some men. Hitler, and Nazi Germany, are undoubtedly something like the incarnation of evil, in liberal eyes. Likewise, they think of Nixon as evil in himself, rather than as a victim of circumstances. From these exceptions results a residue of gnawing doubt that there may be real evil, after all. I would submit that these residual doubts all have been heaped on the back of what is now called, somewhat imprecisely, "Fascism," and that this service of Fascism as a scapegoat has something to do with the fact that Fascism is now dead and gone. For while Hitler was alive and Nazi Germany strong, a good many liberals were quite prepared to look upon the phenomenon as basically rational and good, but distorted by removable frustrations. Thus Neville Chamberlain saw in Hitler only a passionate and somewhat excessive German nationalist. But now that Nazism has been smashed it seems safe to identify it, a present unreality, with evil, the perennial unreality, thus freeing the modern liberal mind from all residues of the Christian traditional view of evil.

One would think that banning ideas of evil from one's mind would bring about an atmosphere of unqualified goodness. Not so. The result, rather, has been a generally amoral atmosphere. Together with the awareness of evil the awareness of a definable goodness also vanished. If there is no more rationale of punishment, neither can there be any rationale of discipline. Again, our age is by no means consistent in that respect. For while dismantling the structure of norms that was acknowledged

in the hearts of men, it is building up an external one, e.g., in the forms of "codes of ethics," codes which become necessary when ethics are no longer habitual. But there is no code of ethics available for criminals, and we are appalled at the ease with which people today commit crimes on any slight impulse. The liberal assumption of recognizable influences of the environment goes overboard when the motive of crime is often a shoulder-shrugging "why not?" Here modern antinomianism becomes visible to the casual observer, as it also becomes visible in the rapid waning of sexual morality, and the directionless drifting of foreign policy. "The center cannot hold" is no longer merely a poet's metaphor but a horrible everyday experience.

5. Finally, let us turn to what I should like to call the "loss of the concept of politics." We shall examine this intellectual process in the context of two other concepts, history and nature. History, not a discipline merely analyzing the past, but the vision of meaning in the succession of all that is remembered and all that is yet to come, has been at the core of Western civilization since Augustine. The Enlightenment made its cut of separation here, too, as it came up with the idea of progress which was embedded in a new fangled "philosophy of history." The infinite perfectibility of man," Condorcet called this view of history. The movement is not only forward in time, but also steadily higher in value. In this perspective history began to appear as a process with the character of salvation, salvation consisting in the climbing and struggling of man rather than the saving grace of God. The resulting futurism, however, began to destroy the past as something that needs to be overcome, or to be combated. Hence the utterly sneering and contemptuous tone with which the word "reactionary" is uttered. To be in continuity with the past is seen as something unspeakably vile. The modern man has cast his anchor into the future alone. There is his true home, there only are values to be found. "The movement which starts with Hegel, and which is triumphant today, presumes. . . that no

one is virtuous but that everyone will be." (Camus) As modern man decided to live exclusively in history, i.e. in the anticipated future, he sacrificed the concept of nature, i.e. of an inherent order of being. With the concept of nature he lost the standard of normativity. "That which has no nature has no norm." (Hans Jonas) History, which has wholly displaced nature, cannot provide any standard of action other than the expediency of action itself. A last and feeble residue of the concept of nature is the concept of equilibrium originally underlying all economics, though now dismissed by economists. It still functions as an unspoken assumption, playing the part of the "mother" to whom man can return when at the end of his tether.

This leads us to the loss of the concept of politics. Politics, government, used to be based on an autonomy of meaning which now is being swallowed by millenarian history on one side, and the direction of economic processes on the other. Politics in the traditional sense had its clearly limited functions. This autonomous political function was established in theory by Plato and Aristotle, but it is also explicitly acknowledged by the Bible, the *doctrina Christiana*, and the Christian liturgy. By way of example, we find the limitation expressed in the Anglican intercession for "all Christian rulers, that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue." If history, however, takes on the character of a process of salvation, with salvation to be attained in this world and by political power all limits vanish. Government then functions to "make new men," "create a new society," combat "the terrible force of habit," and in general to have everyone and everything "become what so far they are not." This, as Rousseau put it, "is a task for gods *not men*," which did not prevent him from assuming precisely this divine role and passing the idea on to Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. When totalitarian groups assume power, they are no longer in the political business of govern-

ing. Totalitarianism is irrational precisely because it is metapolitical. Camus' term "assassins in judges robes" metaphorically grasps the phenomenon of men occupying seats of traditional power while being engaged in the untraditional task of making a new world. Mr. Reagan's habit of quoting Tom Paine to the effect that we are now in a position to make the world anew proves that conservatives are by no means immune to the heady notion of human self-creation.

The other direction in which government tends to lose its political character is economic *dirigisme*. Burke strongly emphasized the political quality of government: "... the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco. . . to be taken up for a little temporary interest. . ." These words reflect Aristotle's original insight: "The end of the state is not mere life: it is, rather, the good quality of life. . . Similarly, it is not the end of the state to provide an alliance for mutual defense against all injury, or to exchange and promote economic intercourse. . . it is the cardinal issue of goodness or badness in the life of the polis which always engages the attention of any state that concerns itself to secure a system of good laws well obeyed. [The state] must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise, a political association sinks into a mere alliance. . . Otherwise, too, law becomes a mere covenant—or 'a guarantor of men's rights against one another'—instead of being, as it should be, a rule of life such as will make the members of the polis good and just." (Pol. III, 9)

Today, however, governments are judged almost exclusively in terms of trade balances, interest rates, labor's wages, profits, or welfare incomes. The ultimate of this development is socialism where the functions of economic production are fully merged with those of government, government then confining itself to adding courts, police forces, and jails to the means of production. Even "free" societies, though, move in this direction, e.g., when defining the task of government in terms of

"monetary" or "fiscal" policies. As political obligation is replaced by economic utility, the bonds of allegiance are fatally weakened. Under the circumstances, wars become inconceivable, not only on the grounds of atomic destruction, but because peoples see themselves less and less as citizens and more and more as "coupon clippers." As a result, the government's mere possession of armaments is regarded by many as an obscenity, and the government's police are called "pigs." Society begins to crumble at its political center.

In this situation we, the two branches of what is called "conservatism," confer to the end of finding a ground for unity, a quest in which nations, and our entire civilization should likewise engage. We find, however, that unity cannot be attained by mere shoulder-slapping cordiality, nor by agreeing on wishful slogans. Let us remember the lesson learned by many of our intellectuals when the horror of the Nazi regime came upon them. They found that their mental equipment was simply inadequate to the task of grasping this new demonism. One had to delve deep down and rethink the very bases of our cultural and historical existence. To this end, one had to trace, with a new and more penetrating analysis, the intellectual history of the past centuries. Some went back to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, others to the Middle Ages, still others to the first centuries of our era. Only in making this intellectual effort could they come up with concepts adequate to deal with the contemporary situation.

We do not face a new Nazism, and Communism has almost become an old hat for us. Our crisis, though, is fully as deep as Europe's was in 1933. Thus we, too, must begin to think new thoughts gained by retracing our intellectual history. Richard Weaver taught us that "ideas have consequences." We must tell each other now that ideas have also roots, and learn how to think by going to the *radix*, the root of our disunities. One byproduct of that kind of effort is that we learn not to blame others, as we come to see ourselves as part of the problem.

I am trying to say that, as we endeavor to find a united voice of conservatives, we must go the way of political theory, philosophy, and comparative religion, for in our time the choice is no longer between faith and agnosticism, but between a God of reality and self-deifying humanism. That does not exclude a discussion of policies or even programs. But policies and programs must appear arbitrary if they are not undergirded by common assumptions, convictions, and principles, and these cannot be just picked up on the street, as it were. One reason why that is impossible is the ubiquitous presence of positivism dominating the social sciences and to some extent also the humanities. Positivism, a late-blooming flower on the stem of Cartesian philosophy, bans all rational consideration of values, indulges in a fetishistic adoration of facts (all facts being alike), and engenders a fateful insensibility to all transcendence. Most contemporary higher institutions of learning impose on their students the positivistic "taboo on theory," meaning on a philosophical inquiry into the things of human order. Thus in this respect, too, we have to move forward by

first going back in our own history, unravelling the strands that became knotted.

Implementing this approach, we could think of issuing a series of "notebooks," to which we might even give such a name as "Signposts." The *Federalist* model, however, is not useful insofar as the publication of articles by three authors under a common *nom de plume* was possible then because there was still a political theory accepted by all educated people. This is no longer our advantage. Hence our need to dig deeper, deeper into theory, and deeper into history. The particular issues of this series of studies, therefore, should each be written by one author, even though there may be several contributors. The entire series also ought to have one editor. It will not do to indulge in the practices of "pluralism" when what we are seeking is unity. The time is ripe for such an enterprise. More in this country than in any other Western country, the intellectual resources are at hand. Attainment is by no means impossible. But if it is unity that we endeavor, we need to begin with the united resolve to go on this quest.